



A Program That Works

Born out of war, the federal Public Vocational Rehabilitation program (commonly called the VR program) has turned lives around and restored dignity to millions of Americans for nearly a century. As a matter of public policy, our nation recognized in the early 1900s that individuals with disabilities could lead productive and successful lives if given the proper support and training. As a result, the VR program was created as our country's response to the needs of disabled veterans returning from World War I.

Since that time, the program has expanded from serving disabled veterans to serving a much broader range of people with disabilities. In our state, it is administered through Arkansas Rehabilitation Services, part of the Department of Workforce Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Services for the Blind. The VR mission today is to help all people with disabilities find employment and lead independent, productive lives.

The need for this program is substantial. Of the 281.4 million Americans counted in the 2000 Census, more than 40 million – or 14 percent – have disabilities. That's a pretty sizable portion of our population. Disability cuts across every demographic as it does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, or social or economic circumstances.

Closer to home, 285,000 Arkansans of working age (16-64) live with some disability. That's almost 17 percent of the state's working-age population. More than half of these working-age Arkansans with a disability are not employed. Their unemployment is not by choice as the vast majority is willing, able, and wanting to work for a living.

I have personally witnessed the contributions that individuals with a disability can make when given the chance. Such success stories include Bobby Dandridge who was in a car accident that broke his back and crushed his lungs. Thanks to the VR program, he graduated from college and now works at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. Then there's Dr. Steven Clift who has a thriving medical practice even though sensory neural damage has left him deaf in one ear. And Tim Carr, who went through rehabilitation following a horrific motocross accident, has become a successful lawyer in Little Rock. These three men are a sampling of the nearly 25,000 people who have been helped by the VR program in Arkansas in just the past 10 years.

To help our fellow Arkansans obtain employment through the VR program, we provide assistive technology, prosthetics, college education, vocational training, job placement, and a variety of other services. For every \$1 we spend, we return \$6 to the state's economy through the increased earnings of the people we help. That's not a bad return on the state's investment. In the process, we also reduce the dependency on welfare and food stamp programs.

The VR program represents what all Arkansans strive for – the opportunity to realize the American dream. To learn more about this successful program or how we can help someone you know, check our Web site at www.arsinfo.org or call 1-800-330-0632 for a brochure.